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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GUAYAQUIL 001039

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SUBJECT: GUAYAQUIL'S LATEST PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER

REF: 04 GUAYAQUIL 01514

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Having all but faded away after years of existence, the Concentration of Popular Forces party (CFP) is making a last-ditch effort to save itself by naming Jaime Damerval as its candidate for the 2006 presidential elections. An outspoken Minister of Government under Lucio Gutierrez, Damerval is respected but resented in Guayaquil. Memories (and grudges) are long here, and his much-publicized confrontation with Mayor Jaime Nebot over the city's handling of security (reftel) will likely hurt him in the city. Nonetheless, the CFP hopes to increase his chances by courting the support of the Ecuadorian Roldosista Party of exiled ex-president Abdala Bucaram (PRE). In a conversation with PolOff, Damerval expressed concern that the Bolivarian movement may present some obstacles, particularly if leaders tap former MinFin Rafael Correa as their candidate. End summary.

#### THE CFP'S RENAISSANCE

2. (U) Founded in the early 1940's, the CFP's real heyday began under the leadership of Asaad Bucaram (uncle of PRE's leader Abdala). An immigrant from Lebanon, Asaad rose to legendary status in local politics in the 1970s. He posed such a threat to the traditional ruling classes that they blocked his run at the presidency by passing a law preventing foreign-born citizens from attaining president's office. Soon after, the party's power peaked and the final blow came when a faction of Roldosista supporters broke off in the early 1980s to support the younger Bucaram. Though but a sliver of their former incarnation, the CFP has managed to stay on the electoral rolls and currently has one member in Congress (Jorge Montero from Loja). Despite their poor standing, in many circles along the coast, the CFP still benefits from Asaad's relatively untarnished reputation.

#### "I'M JUST WHAT ECUADOR NEEDS"

3. (SBU) In a recent meeting with PolOff, Damerval expounded on the party's strategy to recoup its former prominence and avoid political extinction. He claimed he accepted the CFP's invitation because he believes himself to be an ideal candidate, with an upstanding reputation and unattachment to any formal political affiliations. Perhaps even more compelling, he said, was his proven track record as a vocal opponent of the PSC. Unlike former VP Leon Roldos, ("so timid that if he does make it to Carondelet it will be without ever having spoken out about anything or anyone"), Damerval said he would take stands on even the most contentious issues.

4. (SBU) Although he does not plan to truly campaign for another six months, he has begun working with the CFP on an overall strategy. Their plan is to revive the party from the ashes by bringing PRE followers back in to the fold. As the "mother of the PRE," the CFP is already attracting disillusioned PRE followers who have given up on Abdala Bucaram ever returning, he said. PRE leaders themselves seem to be of the same opinion. They recently approached the CFP and offered a vice presidential candidate, sealing the two party's alliance. Damerval said his early announcement was an effort to break the cycle wherein only two coastal candidates were discussed: Roldos and banana king Alvaro Noboa.

#### POSSIBLE BOLIVARIAN MOVEMENT CANDIDATE?

5. (SBU) Damerval is not concerned about either Roldos or Noboa as competitors. However, he said he was troubled about the rise of the "Bolivarian" movement in Guayaquil. While the movement's leader Rene Vargas is based in Manabi, he is really stirring things up in Guayaquil, with plenty of help from Carlos Solorzano (former Supreme Court justice who was one of the coup-plotting triumvirate that overthrew former president Jamil Mahuad in 2000). According to Damerval, the Bolivarians have already approached Correa--whom he also sees as heavily involved in the movement--about running for president. Vargas and Solorzano do not necessarily think that Correa would win, he added. However, they believe Correa would generate a lot of attention to the Bolivarian

movement and their agenda, perhaps even disrupting the free trade agreement with the U.S. Damerval had participated in a panel discussion with Correa last week and called Correa's speech "totally Chavista."

COMMENT

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16. (SBU) The CFP's strategy to pick off PRE supporters could give it the boost they need to stave off oblivion. Its populist platform will likely resonate with some coastal Ecuadorians, dividing the vote there. Damerval retains his well deserved reputation as a fierce critic of the PSC and its ossified leader, Leon Febres Cordero, which was enhanced since he locked horns with Febres Cordero's erstwhile protg, Guayaquil mayor Nebot. The PSC will seek to exploit Damerval's move to quash Nebot's plans to arm private security forces in the city, which provoked the popular 'Marcha Blanca,' in which Nebot declared himself the defender of Guayaquil's historic independence. While a force to be reckoned with, Damerval lacks the charisma to connect with the common man.

17. (SBU) Thus far, the only other coastal pre-candidate is Alvaro Noboa, whom Damerval dismissed as nothing more than a "screeching novelty." For his part, Roldos seems to be backing away from his own candidacy, cloaking his pre-candidacy in the guise of a national reform project. We certainly expect many more coastal candidates will eventually enter the fray before this is over (the campaign period does not formally begin until the latter half of 2006).

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